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ABSTRACT

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Towards Broadening Conceptualizations of the Causes and Correction of Learning and Related Behavior Problems

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Running head: Causes and Correction

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Abstract

The prevailing paradigm for understanding the causes and correction of learning and related behavior problems is seen as over-emphasizing person variables. It is suggested that an interactional model would be more in keeping with contemporary psychological theorizing and available data. Implications of understanding causal determinants in interactional terms are discussed, and a sequential and hierarchical strategy for identification and correction based on an interactional model is outlined.

Towards Broadening Conceptualizations of the Causes and Correction of Learning and Related Behavior Problems[1]

For interventions to be logically planned, they must be based on an underlying rationale regarding the purpose of the intervention and the procedures to be implemented. Critical aspects of any underlying rationale are the concepts used to understand (a) the causes of problems in learning and behavior and (b) how to correct these problems. Even when not systematically formulated and/or explicitly stated, such concepts are seen as stimulating the thoughts and actions of those responsible for the intervention (e.g., see Adelman and Taylor, 1977a; Bruner, 1966; Howard and Orlinsky, 1972). The purpose of this paper is to highlight the prevailing perspective regarding the causes and correction of learning and related behavior problems and the need for broadening this perspective.

Causes

Causal models explaining human behavior may emphasize environmental or internal determinants of behavior or an interaction of both sets of determinants. In general, however, there has been an increasing tendency by psychologists to discuss learning and behavior in interactional terms. At the same time, it has become evident that not all interactional explanations are the same. For example, Bandura (1978) recently has criticized prevailing interactional models as focusing on a delimited set of variables and portraying such variables as operating

unidirectionally. Instead, he has advocated an interactional model of causation which suggests environmental and internal factors reciprocally interact not only with each other but with the organism's behavior as well.

While it is not uncommon for learning and behavior to be discussed in interactional terms, learning and behavior problems seem more commonly to be attributed to person variables, e.g., disorders, disabilities, traits. The reasons for this are understandable in a historical context and in terms of "naive psychology" (Heider, 1958). However, from the standpoint of contemporary psychological theory, it appears to be a premature and overly restrictive paradigm for understanding the wide range of learning and behavior problems. In particular, by adopting this limited perspective, the implications of critical environmental and interactional determinants are rarely discussed and studied, e.g., there is little research on the proportion of learning problems which result primarily from something being wrong with the learning environment. Indeed, the preponderance of the literature on learning problems presents the locus of such problems as being within the person (usually some form of minimal brain dysfunction or emotional problem). Even those writers who suggest that the problem may have begun with factors not within the person, such as faulty child-rearing practices, quickly point out that such factors probably have produced developmental problems--deficits in response capabilities--which are the immediate, direct cause of current problems (and thus, should be the primary focus of treatment).

Since environmental and interactional causal determinants tend to be minimized and, when discussed, the implications tend not to be drawn out, a few points are worth emphasizing here. First, it may be noted that environmental factors which may in themselves be causal variables or which may interact with person factors can be conceptualized on three levels: (1) the immediate environment (e.g., classroom, home), (2) the proximal environment (e.g., school, neighborhood), and (3) the contextual environment (e.g., socio-cultural, political-economic). Stated simply, factors in any of these environments can cause learning and behavior problems by not providing opportunities which mobilize the person and/or facilitate the person's learning efforts. In this connection, environments may be passive, e.g., simply not offering opportunities, or they may be actively hostile, e.g., making demands of the person which (s)he is expected to, but is unlikely to want to and/or be able to fulfill at the time the demands are made. Without amplifying these points further, it should be evident that attributing the locus of the problem to some contemporary environmental conditions leads to different implications for intervention than person-attributions. Specifically, it suggests that changing the environment may be the best intervention. However, the full implications of this point also are often ignored. For example, it is not uncommon to see some problem behavior (e.g., excessive behavior interpreted as attention-getting behavior) as resulting from parents or teachers inadvertently reinforcing such behavior. In such cases, rather than focusing on the child, the focus is

shifted to the "environment" and the adults are asked to behave differently so that the youngster will change. This probably is preferable to continuing to blame the child for bad behavior and focusing all the intervention activity on her/him, while the adults continue to act in inappropriate ways. However, the assumption underlying all the activity is that the child has developed a problem and his/her behavior must be modified. At best, such and orientation recognizes that the environment may be functioning in some inappropriate ways which don't offer opportunities which elicit a positive behavior. The possibility that the behavior is simply a reaction to an actively hostile environment which is making inappropriate demands tends to be ignored.

Before moving on to discuss correction, it also seems worth emphasizing some of the factors which have and continue to be responsible for the relative deemphasis of environmental "causes." One possible reason is suggested by Jones and Nisbett (1971) in their hypothesis that "there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions." The professionals who assess learning and behavior problems, of course, are "observers" in this sense. Another reason for ignoring the implications of an actively hostile environment is that the professionals who intervene to help persons experiencing problems are not usually in the position to make major changes in the environment (especially the proximal and contextual environments). Therefore, they tend to focus on "helping" persons (a) to understand

the problems they are experiencing (usually from the "observer's" perspective that problems are within the person), and (b) either to change in ways that will make them a better match with the environment or to learn to live with their problems. Another reason environmental causes have tended to be deemphasized is suggested by the recent locus of control literature. The prevailing body of knowledge has implied that persons who attributed responsibility for problems to personal characteristics were somehow better people ("good guys") than those who didn't. That is, field independence and internal locus of control attributions were seen as highly related to competence and self-direction. It only has been recently, as the research in the area has become more sophisticated, that the concept of "appropriate external cause" has been discussed prominently. This concept stresses that there are many cases, especially with minority and "second-class" citizens, where identifying the cause as being in the environment is appropriate and where problems could be best eliminated if environmental changes were feasible.

The above discussion of cause implies that the causes of learning and behavior problems are known. In theory, many are. Empirically, however, few factors (person or environment, never mind their complex transactions) have been demonstrated validly to have a specific cause-effect relationship with reference to the most frequently encountered learning and behavior problems. The state of the art is such that if a person has such problems, there is a very low probability that any currently available assessment procedures can validly detect the factors which led to the problem. (That is, such assessment procedures have very

poor postdictive validity.) In fact, the probability of identifying the critical current contributing factors may not be much higher. Thus, it seems clear that it is not so much one's ability to assess as one's theory of causal and contributing factors which are primary shapers of assessment practices, diagnostic classifications, and intervention approaches.

Identification and Correction

Contemporary trends in programs for persons with learning problems include: (1) a wide range of identification and treatment activity designed for persons whose problems actually reside within them, and (2) activity aimed at revising systems such as schools which may be producing many of the problems that subsequently are identified as residing within persons. While these two trends exist, it is well to note again that the bulk of the literature and current investigation is focused on the former. Thus, the various labels assigned to this population (e.g., learning disordered, minimal brain dysfunctioned, dyslexic, hyperkinetic) are stimuli which usually elicit discussion of theories of neurological and biochemical dysfunctions, perceptual-motor problems, language processing problems, nutritional problems, and related treatments, e.g., stimulant drugs, visual-perception training, kinesthetic techniques, special diets, and so forth. That the bulk of work should be so focused is ironic since the current evidence seems to suggest that only a small minority of school-related learning and behavior problems stem from such causes.

In our work, based on an interactional model, we have hypothesized that the best strategy for investigating whether a person has a Specific Learning Disorder is to begin by investigating the possibility that the problem being manifested actually has been caused by a non-facilitative environmental system rather than an internal disorder. That is, by placing a group of persons with learning and behavior problems (including possible Specific Learning Disorders) in an environment which can accommodate their individual differences in motivation and development, it is hypothesized that a significant number will once again begin to learn effectively (Adelman, 1977, 1978). These persons, then, can reasonably be viewed as not having specific disorders--leaving only the minority who continue to have problems to be studied for internal disorders. Thus, our approach to assessing cause is to do so through efforts to correct the problem.

More generally, an interactional model implies the need for an intervention approach which encompasses strategies for dealing with both system and person causal factors. In this connection, our research related to the correction of learning and behavior problems incorporates a sequential and hierarchical set of strategies (e.g., see Adelman, 1971; Adelman and Taylor, 1977a, 1977b). To briefly reiterate the essence of this approach, it should be noted that we begin with the assumption that many persons seen as having problems learning probably do not have internal defects or deficits. Moreover, it is assumed that the facilitation of appropriate learning requires an environment which stimulates accomodative modification and subsequent assimilation, i.e., establishes a pattern of stimulation which results in an optimal match between the

learner's adaptive assimilated schemata and the learning environment. Given these assumptions, the first intervention step needed is seen as being the creation of environments which have a high probability of producing such optimal matches. This means environments which are designed to systematically accomodate a wide range of individual differences in motivation and development. In such enriched environments, interveners work with learners to plan and implement personalized programs keyed to areas where learners are currently intrinsically motivated and geared to their current developmental levels, including provision for the appropriate type and degree of structure (i.e., support and direction) the learner needs in order to progress.

Even after establishing learning agreements (contracts) on the basis of personalized criteria, interveners may find that some learners are continuing to present serious problems in learning and/or behavior. In such instances, the interveners next explore, through conferencing, observation, task analysis, and related assessment activity, whether the learner wants to work on the problem and what special accommodations must be made in the environment to change the problem situation. For example, such assessment activity might involve new activities and subjects, trying different materials, methods and techniques, and possibly even involvement in other programs. After this step, interveners and learners re-evaluate to determine whether the changes in the program resulting from the assessment activity have been effective in addressing the problems or at least have provided data indicating needed additional changes

or the need for a "special" (more intensive) intervention.

If the "normative" environmental changes have not been effective in addressing the learning and/or behavior problems, a special intervention is initiated to provide additional assessment for program planning, and then, if necessary, to implement specialized treatment. In this connection, a resource person (e.g., remedial specialist, psychologist) may be needed to work systematically (sequentially and hierarchically) in further assessing, if feasible, the level at which the problem is based, i.e., first, whether the problem simply results from failure to adequately accomodate motivational and developmental factors or secondly, whether it is due to significant, underlying socio-emotional or processing (neurological) dysfunctions. Such assessment and related treatment activity may be done simply as an adjunct to regular interventions or in a few extreme cases may need to replace these programs for a while. That is, it may be as temporally limited as a one-time session or may be carried out for a prolonged period. For instance, a specialized assessment might involve a one hour interview, several hours of testing, or several weeks of instructional activity; specialized treatments might involve hourly psychotherapy sessions one or more times a week for as long as indicated or a complete one-to-one instructional and counseling program for several weeks in lieu of participation in other programs such as regular or remedial classes. Finally, as effective strategies are identified as part of the specialized interventions, efforts need to be made to translate the special work into activities which can be

carried out as part of regular programs. For example, if a student has been working extensively outside the classroom, this might be accomplished through a tranistion period during which the resource person implements the special program in the context of the classroom, helping the teacher learn and integrate the new procedures into the classroom, and then phasing her or himself out of contact with the student.

Concluding Statement

Space does not allow for more than the above sketchy discussion of these sequential and hierarchical strategies. The reader interested in more detail is referred to the primary sources cited above. Before concluding, however, it is important to emphasize that such a set of strategies does not provide direct solutions to the complex learning and behavior problems manifested by most persons seeking special help; rather they are intended to provide one part of a framework for guiding those who attempt to provide such help. Moreover, the model provides a basis for guiding much needed research activity.

As has been stressed, these corrective strategies are based on an interactional view of the causes of learning and behavior problems. In concluding, it is well to emphasize that in addition to the theory and empirical findings one draws upon (one chooses) with reference to understanding the causes and correction of problems, intervention activity also is shaped by one's choice of value and belief commitments, personal and professional. These choices combine into a rationale underlying one's positions regarding (a) what motivates behavior, (b)

what facilitates and what hinders learning and performance, and (c) what constitutes an appropriate helping relationship. (There are, of course, also a variety of pragmatic factors influencing such positions.) Given that such factors do combire into a rationale shaping practices and research, an awareness of the reationale underlying any particular activity and the inadequacies of that rationale may be seen to be critical if progress is to be made in dealing more efficaciously with learning and behavior problems than is currently the case.

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Footnotes

[1]Abridged version of material presented at the World Congress of the Council for Exceptional Children, Stirling, Scotland, 1978